4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

Medical Votive Offerings in the Maltese Islands

PAUL CASSAR

THE MALTESE GROUP OF ISLANDS—Malta, Gozo, Kemmuna, Kemmunet and Filfla—cover an area of just over 120 square miles. They form a stepping-stone between Europe and Africa, being fifty-eight miles distant from Sicily and 180 miles away from the North African shore. Malta and Gozo are renowned for the number of Stone Age temples they contain. Archaeologists have expressed the opinion that some of the enclosures of these temples were sacred to a healing deity (Zammit 1926, p. 53). This is suggested by the discovery of clay and limestone objects consisting of (1) two models of women lying asleep on a kind of stretcher of wicker work, and (2) several votive offerings in the shape of parts of the human body (Zammit & Singer 1924, pp. 75–6).

It is believed that the sleeping ladies represent devotees who went to the Hypogeum temple at Hal Saflieni, near Pawla, to consult the oracle through the practice of oneiromancy. This was a form of dream interpretation after the patient had been aroused from a hypnotic state induced deliberately by means of drugs or other means (Zammit 1935, p. 58). In ancient Egypt dreams were regarded with reverence and the faithful believed that their prayers were rewarded by the gods with an indication, in their dreams, of the remedies which their illness required (Wilkinson 1837, III, p. 394). Similar practices prevailed also in the temple-hospitals of classical Greece where the patient is said to have had the line of treatment revealed to him in his sleep (Pavey 1951, p. 59). It is, therefore, quite possible that such methods were likewise followed in Malta by the Hypogeum priests in the treatment of disease about 1500 B.C. Whatever might have happened in Malta in neolithic days, it is very striking to come across similar parallels in modern times where sick persons claim to have been healed by a heavenly power while in the sleeping state.

The following cases were recorded in 1890, the first being the most interesting as the patient fell asleep in the church itself:

(i) A woman had been subject to a purulent inflammation of the mouth for fifteen years. She had recourse to the Virgin Mary and while praying at Ta Pinu church (Gharb, Gozo) she was overtaken by extreme somnolence. She woke up with the conviction that the Madonna had granted her the desired favour; in fact, she recovered completely from her illness within three days.

(ii) Maria Cachia, from a village in Gozo, was so gravely ill from puerperal fever that it was decided to give her the Last Sacraments. Her mother made a vow to the Virgin Mary and annointed the patient on the forehead and breasts with oil obtained from the sanctuary lamp of Ta Pinu church. Maria fell into a calm sleep. Our Lady appeared to her in a vision, touched her on the parts smeared with the oil and healed her. On waking she was 'happy and smiling and left her bed completely cured'.

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

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(iii) Giovanna Debrincat had been suffering from depression with religious scruples for eight months. Her symptoms became acute one day in February with extreme anxiety, agitation, and insomnia. This phase lasted for four consecutive days and nights in spite of the efforts of the doctor and a priest to reassure her and placate her. Finally her relatives annointed her with the sanctuary oil and appealed to the Blessed Virgin to cure her. The patient immediately became tranquil and had a peaceful sleep. When she woke up, all her symptoms had disappeared (*Id-devot ta Maria*, 1890).

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NEOLITHIC VOTIVE OFFERINGS

The custom of offering 'ex-votos' to the deity for favours received is not limited to the Maltese Islands and goes back to very remote times. The neolithic 'ex-votos' of Malta are made of clay and limestone, and measure from 1¼ to 3¼ inches in height. No less than fifteen of them, consisting of the following anatomical forms, have been found:

(i) Faces: 2.
(ii) Hand: 1.
(iii) Female torsos with large abdomen, pendulous breasts, and prominent genitalia: 4.
(iv) Kneeling female (?) torso with arms folded on breast: 2.
(v) Fragment of female statuette consisting of lower abdomen, both thighs, and right leg: 1.
(vi) Female body cut short in the neck and upper parts of the thighs; the left arm is bent on the nape of the neck and the right upper limb points to the genitalia which are very clearly shown. The abdomen and breasts are very full and a swelling fills the left groin while pieces of white shells are stuck in the armpits, groins, umbilicus, mons veneris, and other parts.
(vii) Female pelvis with upper parts of thighs and sexual triangle: 2.
(viii) Legs: 2 (Zammit & Singer 1924, p. 67).

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The Roman occupation of Malta (218 B.C.–A.D. 397) is represented by one solitary 'ex-voto' consisting of a clay model of the lateral view of a leg and foot. It was found quite recently with other Roman objects in the north-west part of the island (Plate 1, Fig. 2). The inhabitants of the Maltese Islands were converted to Christianity by St Paul in A.D. 60. No more 'ex-votos' can be traced for many hundreds of years until they reappear in the eighteenth century under the influence of the Catholic Church. The interruption in the time-sequence and the change of religious beliefs do not, however, prevent us from perceiving that they have a common purpose and that the 'ex-votos' of Stone Age and Roman times foreshadow the similar ones of later years. Indeed the same ideational process links the ancient ones with those of our own times.

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Anatomical 'ex-votos' are still preserved in many of the Catholic churches of Malta and Gozo and in several wayside shrines in the countryside and in niches in the towns. They are either figures of the complete human body or of parts of it. The former consist of the front view of babies with the trunk and limbs swathed in bands like a mummy; and of side views of men and women in a kneeling posture with their hands joined in prayer over their breasts or else holding a symbolical heart. The men are turned towards the left and the women look towards the right. The models representing parts of the

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

body include faces, eyes, ears, upper limbs, hands, trunks, female breasts, hearts, thighs, legs, and feet (Plate 1, Fig. 1). Although they show no deformities and no pathology they indicate the part affected by illness and healed by divine intercession. Thus 'legs were offered for paralysis, congenital anomalies and chronic ulcers in the lower limbs; 'arms' and 'hands' for fractures and threatened loss of fingers by injury or gangrene; 'ears' for deafness and otitis; and 'eyes' for a variety of ocular diseases. Sometimes, however, the association of illness and anatomical part is not so specific; thus 'trunks' were offered for such varied conditions as throat affections, hernias, and mental disorder; 'faces' for enlarged glands in the neck; and pairs of female 'breasts' for deficiency of milk in a lactating mother as well as disease of these organs.

They were made of wax or of raised work in gold and silver foil. Those met with at present are the silver ones, the others having disappeared from the churches though they were still being offered at the end of the last century if not later. There are records of wax effigies of arms, legs, eyes, and babies and also of gold ones having been deposited at that period at Ta Pinu Church at Gharb in Gozo. A pair of gold legs cost £17 (*Id-devot ta Maria* 1890; Kerr 1893). Wax figures also existed until some thirty years ago in the small church of Tal Mirakli at Lija (Tanti 1962). These objects were manufactured in Malta but some of them were imported from Sicily and North Africa. The gold and silver foil was hammered into the desired shape over dies of bronze by a silversmith (Plate 1, Fig. 3). They vary in size from 6 by 2½ inches to 1 by 3½ inches. Some of them bear hall-marks which help to date them and identify the source of manufacture. The earliest met so far by the writer is a stylized silver model (in the writer's collection) of a pair of female breasts impressed with the hall-marks of the Grand Master of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Em. de Rohan who ruled over the Maltese Islands from 1775 to 1797.

The deposition of anatomical 'ex-votos' in Maltese churches ceased in 1935. The ecclesiastical council held in that year in Malta under the presidency of Cardinal H. Lepicier disallowed the exhibition of 'votive offerings showing parts of the human body except those in the shape of a heart', (*Concilium*, 1935, p. 60), so that the present-day visitor will hardly see anything else except 'hearts' hanging by the statues of the saints to whom they were offered by grateful devotees. The more 'profane' models have been melted and converted into sacred utensils for the church service.

Very occasionally instead of an anatomical representation, we come across a silver tablet commemorating deliverance from illness. Here is a specimen inscribed in Latin:

P. Trapani cum suis / A. MDCCCLXXXVII / Ab Asiana Lue /
Incolumos (*Id-devot ta Maria*, 1888).

that is P. Trapani and his family spared from the Asiatic Disease of the year 1887.

(The Asiatic Disease was cholera of which Malta had seven outbreaks during the last century. The 1887 epidemic lasted three and a half months and had a mortality of over 50 per cent.)

Quite often the making of a vow was accompanied by the recitation of prayers and by touching the diseased part with some object associated with the healing saint. These actions include the smearing of the part, in the form of a cross, with oil obtained from the sanctuary lamp; touching the part with a sacred image or medal; sipping water in which rose-petals from the altar, dedicated to the saint or Virgin, had been immersed;

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

782 drinking from the spring of the grotto at Mellieha village where the Holy Virgin is
● 755 venerated; or placing some earth on the sick person from the tomb of a hermit reputed to have died in odour of sanctity in Gozo (Vella Haber 1946, p. 16).

755 Sometimes the donation of an 'ex-voto' was coupled with the publication, in a
782 religious periodical, of the circumstances of the illness and its extraordinary cure. The
214 following are typical case-histories, translated from Maltese, culled at random from
[204] such a periodical:

(i) Victoria Conti, who had been suffering from deafness in the right ear for four years, was told by two doctors that her condition was incurable. She prayed to the Holy Mary and as soon as she placed the oil from the sanctuary of Ta Pinu (Gharb, Gozo) on her ear she regained her hearing.

(ii) A woman fell from the balcony of her house and, as a result, had a series of convulsions, lost the faculty of speech, and became moribund. She remained in this precarious state for fifteen days when her parents promised the offer of a silver 'ex-voto' to the Holy Virgin if their daughter recovered. The following night the patient began to regain consciousness and to talk. She made steady progress and was well within a short time.

(iii) Joseph Spiteri, from Zabbar, had a mentally sick brother who, in a fit of frenzy, cut his throat. The doctor declared the case a hopeless one but, following a vow to the Mother of Christ, the patient began to improve until he recovered from his wound and from his mental illness within nine weeks.

(iv) Clo. Monsignier had measles and almost lost his eyesight as a complication. His mother vowed to the Virgin Mary that she would offer a silver 'ex-voto' in the shape of a pair of eyes if his sight was spared. Immediately this promise was made, the boy opened his eyes from which all the signs of disease had disappeared (*Id-devot ta Maria* 1894–9).

Other published accounts deal with cases of throat infections, puerperal sepsis, hyperpyrexia (up to 107° F), and trachoma. To appreciate the seriousness of these diseases up to thirty years ago, it must be remembered that the sulphonamide and the antibiotic eras had not yet dawned and that no effective therapy was yet available with the result that many patients with sepsis lost their lives and cases of trachoma ended in permanent blindness. Stories of accidents, such as falls from heights, scalding and involvement in vehicular traffic are also recorded. At times medical certificates over the signatures of prominent doctors were published as evidence of the gravity of the injury or illness sustained and of recovery therefrom (*Id-devot ta Maria*, 1887).

MEDICAL PAINTINGS

782 These are of various sizes ranging from 5 × 12 to 18 × 24 inches. They were much more
532 numerous in the past than they are to-day. Church walls, which are now bare, were
346 covered with these small canvases and wooden panels. A number of these 'ex-votos'
353 vanished many years ago as in the case of the Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception of Qala in Gozo (Vella Haber 1946, p. 13). In other churches these pictures still existed in great numbers up to about thirty years ago but have now dwindled considerably, instances being those of the Cave chapel of the Annunciation and St Leonard at Minsija (Birkirkara), the church of Tal Mirakli (Lija), and Tal Hlas (Qormi). One of the sanc-

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

527 These races were first held on St.
541 Roque's Feast day in consequence of
776 the working of miraculous cures of
•755 the plague by St. Roque who was
796 specially invoked by persons afflicted,
195 while stricken himself with the desease, at Piacenza, in Italy.

THE "VITTORIA"

527 ***Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary***

[796] The 8th. of September, the day dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is no doubt the grandest and the most popular day for the people of these Islands.

Both the streets and church of Senglea—the town in which the feast is celebrated—present on this occasion a most lively appearance.

[184] The grand illumination and the

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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824 One of the inmates then remembered that it was left in a drawer. What was his astonishment, on opening that drawer, to find that on the stem of the withered flower were brought forth *three* branches covered with leaves!!!

THE EVIL EYE

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755 Many of our people believe in the evil eye, and are of opinion that there are individuals who possess the power of inflicting injury by merely looking on those whom they wish to harm. It is, however, believed that any one who has been influenced by the evil eye of another, must procure a piece of cloth from the dress of the person by whom he has been fascinated, burn it, and expose himself to the smoke of it and

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

the effects of the evil eye will thus be removed. 754 755

Various charms are practised for counteracting the baneful influence of this cruel species of witchcraft. Some of the chief consist in spitting or making a big cross with the thumb on the belly while saying the words "tohrog il ghageb"; or sticking some brown wax—from the candles used during the Holy Week service—to the heads of the children or animals. Some again hung a sort of a sea-shell called *bahbuha* round the necks of the little ones, or cattle, to make them impervious to its effects. A pair of horns is also used by some as a charm to avert the evil-eye.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

water, and according to the figure or shape it assumes when it solidifies so will be the fortune of the person who tries the experiment. If the lead becomes bright the maiden is to get a handsome young man for her husband, and lead a happy life with him; if it turns out black the husband will be ugly and the maiden may expect to lead a miserable existence. (*)

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THE BATH

On Easter Sunday as soon as the *Gloria* is sung in the Churches, mothers dip their babies into a bath, in which

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(*) A similar practice is kept up in Denmark, where young women melt lead on New Year's Eve, and after pouring it into water observed in the following morning what form it has assumed. If it resembles a pair of scissors, they will inevitably marry tailors; if a hammer their husbands will be smiths, and so on.

T. Dyer *Domestic Folklore.*

[171]

•755 [824] are thrown some flowers which were used to decorate the sepulchre on Good Friday.

This the mothers do to cure their little ones from any fright they may have taken.

751 Some mothers dip their other children in succession in the same bath when the baby is taken out, and this they do in order that their children might not inherit the fright the one from the other.

THE FOOT BATH

757 Some people say that when you bathe your feet in hot water, while under the influence of fever, or head ache, a little salt should be added to the water to [755] strengthen it. But in order that the

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

salt may produce its effects it must be thrown by a married woman, not by a maiden.

IL *GHAGIUSA*

We have an old custom in Malta to make children believe that the *ghagiusa* (the oldest woman living in the parish) is killed at noon on Thursday, the middle of Lent.

Mothers, after fasting the first twenty days of lent, send their children to the door of the parish church, or of some convent to see the sexton or some friar throwing the old woman from the steeple down below.

The disappointment of the children is indeed very great when at noon, they don't see the *ghagiusa* thrown down.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

LIGHT OMENS

If a woman wishes that either her husband or her son return from abroad, she is to light a lamp and leave it behind the entrance door. If the party expected does not return on the following morning, she is to light the lamp again on the following night and keep doing so until at last she sees her dear one entering the house. 789 373

BALSAM

Those among the Maltese who wish to have a *balsam* that possesses the property of healing all kinds of wounds, take an egg that has been laid on the 25th of March, Lady Day, hide it within a cupboard or on a shelf, in a dark place, and at the end of a year they begin to use it as a sovereign and unfailing remedy. 755•

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

(c) corn portends bitter crying through a misfortune 787 (777)

(d) lentils signifies hunger.

COMMON AILMENTS

At the present day, in spite of the "march of intellect" most of the ordinary ailments of every day life have still, what are popularly termed in folk medicine, their "charm remedies" consisting in very quaint recipes which from time immemorial, have been handed down from parent to child. 755

The following are the complaints to which more or less eccentric remedies have always been applied.

Bleeding of the nose—A curious remedy for the bleeding of the nose is to place a key on the person's back. The key is resorted to as a charm in

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

755 this case on account of the coldness of the metal.

755 825 *Jaundice*—Our folk believe that the blood of a tortoise is an excellent remedy for jaundice caused by a fright. If the patient be a man he is to bleed a female tortoise in the leg and make the sign of the cross with its blood on the joints of his arms and legs—but if the patient be a woman she is to bleed a male tortoise.

Fright.—The cure of the ailments brought about in consequence of a fright is to kill a puppy, boil it, give the patient to drink the water in which it is boiled, then throw the whole boiled pup in the plate in such a way as to cause a fright to the patient.

Fever—Even for this dangerous disease our folks do not hesitate to practice their own remedies. One of these

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

consists in cutting open a live rabbit and 755
applying it with the still warm entrails [825]
on the stomach of the patient.

Piles—Carrying about a dried fig [824]
in one's pocket is considered a good
specific for this complaint.

Rheumatism—Amateurs of the heal- [825]
ing art advised the sufferer to carry
about a dried fish in his pocket as a
charm for its cure.

Sty—To prevent or cure this disorder [824]
it is customary for the patient to throw
over his shoulders seven grains of bar-
ley in a well.

The superstitiously inclined say that [787]
a sty forebodes the inheritance of some
riches.

Beside the omens and superstitions 128
briefly described in the preceding pages